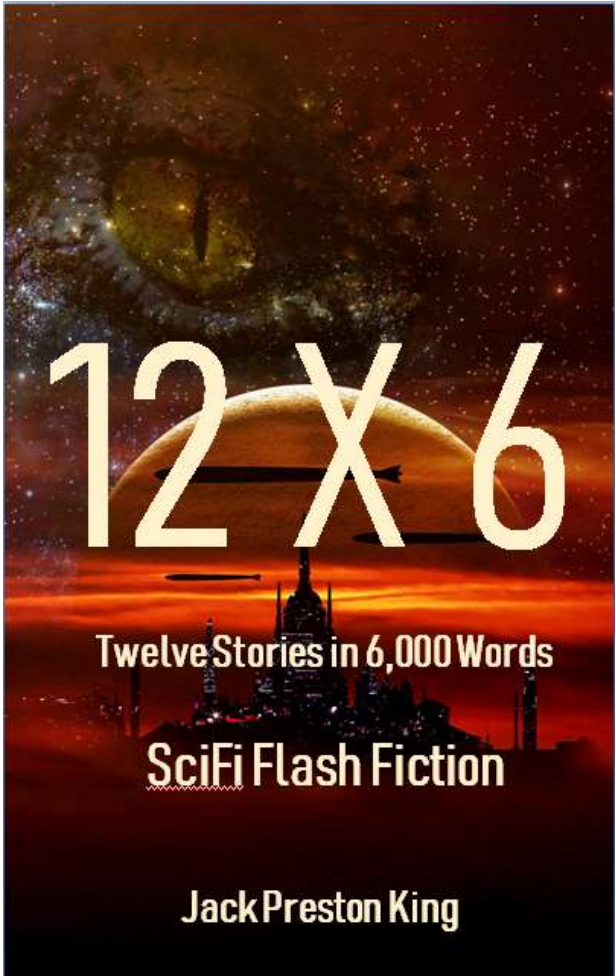




12 X 6

Twelve Stories in 6,000 Words

SciFi Flash Fiction

Jack Preston King

12 X 6 - Twelve Stories in 6,000 Words
SciFi Flash Fiction

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The Truth About the Moon

When Hilliard Simpson self-published *The Truth About the Moon* in the summer of 2020, it was ignored outside the fringe of the conspiracy community. Even the single Reddit thread devoted to his prophecy eventually went silent for lack of interest.

Hilliard had a vision that the Moon was alive, that it was Earth's baby, a tiny planet *in-potentia* whose five billion years in orbit were equivalent to the nine months human embryos gestate in the womb. He predicted Baby Luna was due in 2021. That signal year passed, nothing visible on the Moon changed, and even the crackpots wrote Hilliard off as a crackpot.

Then, in 2023, the eye opened. It was round, with a green-brown pupil surrounded by white. It never blinked, but only stared down at the Earth. It filled most of the *Oceanus Procellarum*, making it close

to 1,600 miles across. Everyone on Earth, looking up, could see it plain as day.

And, presumably, the eye could see them. The pupil darted eerily back and forth across its massive white sclera, looking here, looking there, watching.

The world soon discovered *The Truth About the Moon*. Hilliard found himself in demand as an expert on cable news shows, and wealthy as his book (a pamphlet, really, at only 48 pages) skyrocketed to the #1 spot on Amazon.

Not everyone found his vision comforting. A religious man, Hilliard had written that the Moon's birth seemed likely to trigger the Rapture, spiriting millions of believers away to Heaven, to be followed, for those left behind, by terrible earthly Tribulations. Scientists and government officials mostly agreed the idea was ludicrous.

Then people by the hundreds, then thousands, and finally millions began floating up into the sky.

Even the skeptics had to admit there was something to Hilliard's prophecy.

Telescopes trained on the rising masses revealed that, at altitudes that should have ruptured their lungs and ballooned their dead bodies like great human puffballs, they were perfectly healthy, rising ever higher, waving their arms and legs gleefully as they tumbled through space. As they crossed the bright Lunar horizon, by ones and twos and tens they vanished – tumbling, it was presumed, to their dark side Heavenly reward.

Hilliard speculated that Heaven must be on the Moon. That hadn't been part of his original vision, but it was the only thing that made sense in the context of all that Glorious Rapturing. When he found his own body rising on the wind, catching up

into the sky, he felt no fear at all. Only eager anticipation.

The fear set in once he crested the shining horizon and found himself falling.

Not toward Heaven, though. Not even toward Hell, by any traditional reckoning.

At least he'd die knowing he'd been right. That his prophecy was true. The Moon really was alive.

He supposed, plummeting, that he shouldn't be surprised. It seemed only logical that a newborn planet with an eye might also possess a mouth.

And that mouth might be open.
Ravenous. Feeding.

What We Lie About When We Lie About Mars

The baby in her arms slept soundly, as if it were safe. As if it would live forever.

“Sondra?”

“Active.”

“I need to message Paul. I want to say goodbye.”

Sondra processed silently for almost a full minute. Outside the window, the horizon-to-horizon flashes continued as an unbroken line of Martian warships systematically levelled everything. Killed everyone. Drew closer with every sweep.

Finally, Sondra’s communication-light brightened.

“I’m sorry, Jane. I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Earth Command has forbidden it.”

Brighter flashes, and now she could hear the explosions. She imagined people screaming.

Women. Children.

All the men were on Mars. Fighting the war.

“Earth-Com says I can’t message my own husband?”

“You cannot *say goodbye*. Front line soldiers can’t know the Earth is lost. They’d lose their will to fight. And we must still win the war.”

Jane was too heartsick to argue with her house AI.

“Can you at least tell him I love him? Just that?”

Sondra rescanned the Earth-Com directive.

“That would be permissible. Message sent.”

DEAREST PAUL. I LOVE YOU.

And because the directive required it, Sondra added:

YOUR FAMILY IS SAFE. FIGHT BRAVELY. WIN THE WAR. COME HOME.

The next flash found them.

The lightless tunnel narrowed, then terminated altogether. *Dead end*. Paul could hear Martians buzzing and chirping in the darkness behind him. At least a dozen, by the sound of it. Moving inexorably in his direction. He was trapped.

The communicator pulsed around his neck and he spun flat against the wall to mask its light.

A message from Earth. It was Jane.

DEAREST PAUL. I LOVE YOU. YOUR FAMILY IS SAFE. FIGHT BRAVELY. WIN THE WAR. COME HOME.

His tears then were born as much from rage as from sorrow. This wasn't a war. It was an extermination. And humans were the rats. If they lost the fight on Mars...

They'd already lost Mars. They never stood a chance. Earth was only a matter of time.

But right this moment, Jane was safe. The baby was safe. They deserved to be happy. They deserved hope. For however little time they had left.

WE'RE WINNING, he typed. DON'T WORRY. I'LL BE HOME SOON. I LOVE YOU.

Message sent.

A torrent of buzz-chirping announced the Martians were closing in.

For Jane. For the baby. For Home.

He powered on his weapon.

Fight bravely. Win the war.

He charged, firing, into the darkness.

A Win-Win Situation

“Do you know the term *Cognitive Dissonance*?”

Bill Jeffries didn't answer. He shifted his weight in the over-plush chair. There was no getting comfortable.

“In the 1950s a social psychologist named Leon Festinger infiltrated a flying saucer cult. [Their leader talked to space people](#). They told her a worldwide flood was coming. Millions would die. She and her followers would be saved, evacuated into space in UFOs.”

“UFO stands for *Unidentified Flying Object*. If she met the space people, their ships weren't exactly *unidentified*, were they?”

“Sorry. She used the word *saucers*. The flood and the evacuation were supposed to happen on a certain date – which came and

went, of course. No flood, no saucers. Festinger studied how group members processed the failure of the prophecy.”

“I read [Festinger’s book](#). The flood was canceled. The world was spared. Festinger lacked real faith. He couldn’t accept the truth.”

“You’re doing *right now* what most of those cult members did in the ‘50s, Bill. You’re reframing what happened in order to preserve the disconfirmed belief. The space people channeled whole volumes of subjective spiritual teachings through the cult leader. About higher vibrations. About God. About souls and human destiny. But they also told her the world would *really* flood and spaceships would *physically* land in her back yard. That objective prophecy proved false. Imaginary. Doesn’t that invalidate everything else the space people supposedly told her? And the cult leader herself? Don’t you suspect it was *all* imaginary, then?”

“My prophecy didn’t fail.”

“According to your website, the good aliens told you the bad aliens would invade the earth on Christmas Day, 2017. It’s 2018, Bill. Look around. No aliens.”

“Oh, they’re here. In disguise. They’re not ready to reveal themselves yet.”

“What are they waiting for?”

Bill’s eyes darted toward the closed office door. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Me,” he answered. “The Aldebarans say I’m the key. If I alert the world, we can stop the Reptilians. They aren’t here in full force yet. We can beat them right now if we present a unified front. They’re waiting to see if I succeed. In uniting the world.”

The psychiatrist nodded. He smiled reassuringly.

"I can help you, Bill. The court ordered ten of these sessions before a ruling is made on your competence. You're obviously a smart guy. But the court is concerned you may also be dangerous. Help me prove them wrong."

"I don't know... Maybe."

"*Maybe's* a good start. A foundation for recovery. Tomorrow we'll start building on that foundation. Together."

Silence.

"You can do this. I believe in you."

The lock *click-clicked* and the door swung inward. A guard escorted Bill Jeffries from the office.

When the lock reengaged and the room was secure, Agent Gorz slithered out from beneath the desk and into the still-warm chair.

“HQ blocked the Aldebaran *s-s-s*-signal.
He’s *s-s-s-s* the only one they reached.”

“Don’t worry,” the psychiatrist
answered. “He’ll break. Or they’ll lock him
up. It’s a win-win *s-s-s*-situation.”

He laughed.

“For us *s-s-s-s*.”

An Impossible Woman

"Check this out, Beck."

Great Aunt Wanda had died owning nothing but a fairly new computer, some kitchen stuff, and three rooms of cigarette-scented furniture from the '70s. David had drawn the short straw and got stuck cleaning out her apartment. He took everything to the dump except the computer. What the heck. It worked, and it was free. He was deleting useless crap from the hard drive when he stumbled on the file.

"She's traced every generation on my dad's side back to the 1600s. Which is..."

"You should delete it. You don't care about that genealogy crap."

"*Which is...* actually pretty cool, in an old lady kind of way. You're right, though,

most family tree stuff puts me to sleep. But there's an unsolved mystery here."

He clicked to 1613, where the chart began.

Joseph Frederick Berryman, 1613 to 1669, his great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather, was born in Yorkshire England and died in Massachusetts. He married Anya Marie Berryman in 1632. There was no record of her birth, death, or maiden name.

"That doesn't surprise me," Beck said bitterly. "Wives were valued less than cattle then. Misogynist bastards. Seriously, just delete it."

"Hold on." He scrolled right and the chart flowed forward in time.

Joseph's son, Daniel Joseph Berryman, 1633 to 1705, married Veronica Jane Shenk in 1655. She was born in 1635 and died in 1692.

That looked normal. He scrolled right.

Daniel's firstborn, Martin Daniel Berryman, 1656 to 1720, married Anya Abigail Berryman in 1680. No birth, no death, no maiden name listed.

Martin's son, Jacob Joseph Berryman, was born in 1681 and died in 1752. In 1704, he married Elizabeth Anne Stone, born 1685, died 1750.

Their eldest, Jacob Martin Berryman, lived from 1705 to 1772. He married Anya Katherine Berryman in 1730. No birth, death, or maiden name recorded.

Every second generation, the mysterious Anya appeared out of nowhere, married the firstborn son, bore an heir, then *poof!* Gone.

"What if it's the same woman?"

"That's impossible."

“Like some immortal demon lover. Tied to my dad’s bloodline.”

“Or like some stupid coincidence. You watch too many movies. Why do you care about this, anyway?”

“This is my family. This is me. I had no idea.”

“You still have no idea. Maybe it’s just bad recordkeeping. Maybe Wanda made it all up. Maybe she was getting ready to write a fantasy novel or something.”

“Great Aunt Wanda? All I ever saw her do was smoke and watch TV. I sorted her stuff. She didn’t even own a book. Why would she write one?”

“Just delete the file, David. You don’t want to know this.”

He ignored her and scrolled through the 1800s, then the 1900s. The pattern held. It was as if, every other generation, the

mysterious Anya Berryman fell out of the sky with a new middle name, procreated, then zipped right back up to heaven.

Or somewhere.

He scrolled right.

“Stop it, David. Seriously. Take your hand off the mouse. Please.”

“Aren’t you curious?”

He scrolled right.

“David, stop!” She slapped the mouse out of his hand and it clattered to the floor.

“What the...”

Her hand rested on his shoulder. The chart had flowed forward to the 1970s. On the screen were David’s father, Allen Joseph Berryman, and his mother Sarah Jane Phillips. Their dates of birth were clearly

displayed. Their 1992 marriage. David retrieved the mouse.

“Don’t. I’m serious. You don’t want to know this.”

“Yes,” he said. “I do.”

He scrolled right.

David Allen Berryman, born 1993, married Anya Rebecca Berryman in 2017.

Her date of birth was missing.

“That’s not right,” he said. “You’re maiden name is...”

The word was right there on the tip of his brain, but then it trailed off to nothing like a song fading out on the radio.

“Your parents are...”

He couldn’t remember. Their faces were gone.

The weight of Beck's hand was suddenly missing from his shoulder. The air thinned as a vacuum formed in the space behind his chair.

In the nursery, awakened from a dream of inconsolable loss, little Joseph David Berryman, born January 6, 2018, began to cry.

His father joined him.

Desperate Measures

Ray's muse had abandoned him. His novel was due by morning or the deal was off. He'd have to return the advance, which of course was long spent.

But he just couldn't write. He was dust inside.

He needed help. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

He turned out all the lights in the house, lit two votive candles on the dining room table, lowered himself into one of the tall wooden chairs, and closed his eyes. His back was straight, feet flat against the carpet, chest rising and falling with breaths drawn in through the nose, then slowly released through pursed lips. The laptop's fan hummed intrusively on the table before him, its keys pushing back against his hovering fingertips.

“Are there any spirits in the room?”

Nothing happened. This was stupid. He had no idea how to make something like automatic writing work. Tomorrow he'd see if the library had any books on Spiritualism or Theosophy...

You're doing fine, Ray, his fingers typed. If by spirits you mean the ghosts of dead people, then no, there are none of those here. I sent them all away.

He read the words a dozen times in the candlelight. Having the process of automatic writing come too easily was in ways more troubling than having it not work at all. While the words were being typed, he hadn't felt his fingers moving. He heard the keyboard *tap-taping* away, but it was as if the keys were moving on their own. Now, reading and rereading the words, he had a clear memory of typing them. He remembered it both ways.

He let his fingers hover again over the keyboard. He half-closed his eyes, and whispered, “Who are you?”

A bright rectangle of light fell across the dining room floor, as if someone had turned on all the lights in the living room.

Go on, check it out, the keyboard urged.

He had not expected automatic writing to be scary. He honestly hadn’t expected it to work at all – but if by some weird chance it did, he thought channeling spirit messages would be fun, invigorating, even.

But the light shining in from the living room terrified him. It shouldn’t be there. It couldn’t be there. His heart tantrumed to escape, stamping its angry little feet in his chest. Sweat pooled beneath his arms and poured salt from his forehead down into his eyes.

The keyboard was *tap-tapping*:

Get a grip, Ray. Go to the living room. It's perfectly safe.

He steeled his racing heart with a long, deep breath, thrust his chair away from the table, pushed himself up and onto his feet, and in three bold strides reached the open doorway.

Yellow-white luminescence blazed inside as if the room was on fire.

Behind him, the keyboard sounded: *Tap-tap*. Pause. *Tap-tap*.

In his mind, Ray could see the screen glowing on the dining room table, and the words:

Go on.

He stepped into the light.

And recognized her at once. Standing in the living room. Terrifying in her brilliance.

His muse. Home at last.

You want me back.

It was not a question. They both knew the answer. He nodded *yes*.

For good.

Again, he nodded.

Here's the deal then, Ray. Get this straight. I am not your muse. You're my writer.

He'd always suspected that. He was already nodding.

You don't own me. I own you. Till the end.

He nodded his enthusiastic *yes* and the room went dark. He fell to his knees, sobbing with relief.

Behind him, in the dining room, the laptop exploded in a fury of *tap-tapping*.

Angels

As far as the eye could see across the rolling green pasture, on both sides of the gravel road, hundreds of cows stood stock-still and silent, their necks stretching uncannily as they craned to look up into the sky. It was such a strange sight that he couldn't help but follow their gaze.

At first there was only the open blue sky, but the cows kept staring, so he kept staring, and pretty soon the edges of something half as big as the sky itself wavered into view. It was a perfect cube that first absorbed the puffy clouds and then the blue space between them. Its outline shimmered the way heat mimics water on the highway. Then all at once it was solid, gray-silver-metallic, and so alarmingly huge that the yard faded to dusk in its shadow. The summer air instantly cooled ten degrees.

The screen-door opened then cracked shut behind him. His daughter appeared at his side.

"So that's them? Your angels?"

"It's them."

"They gonna hurt the cows?"

She laughed. "No, Dad. They're not here for your cows. They're here for me."

"I won't let them hurt you."

"Angels don't hurt people."

He made a quiet "*hmmph*" deep in his throat. "We've done this before, haven't we?"

"Many times." She took his hand. "That's how you knew it was them. You felt it in your body. They've come every two years since I was born. The last time on my eighteenth birthday. During my party. Your

mind doesn't remember, though. They don't let anybody remember."

"Except you."

"Except me."

"I always knew I lost something, those times. That things had changed. Or a piece of time went missing." He looked down at his boots, the wooden steps beneath them. "I'll forget today, too, won't I?"

"You will." She nodded her head, then sighed. "And you'll forget me."

He wished he didn't know what she meant, but his body remembered what his mind could not. A shiver started at the base of his neck and shook him in slow waves from head to toe.

"So this is it? You won't be back?"

"My mission was temporary. Part of you always knew that."

"I wish you could stay. Your mamma's gonna miss you."

"She won't. They won't let her. You'll both be fine."

He *"hmmph"*ed again, his jaw tight.

"I'm so happy they chose you, Dad. Mom, too. I want you to know that. You're both wonderful. My human life has been wonderful."

She squeezed his hand, then stretched up onto her tiptoes to kiss his cheek.

"I will never forget you, Daddy. Never."

Then he was alone on the porch, staring up into the blue summer sky. Cows grazed, heads bowed, as far as the eye could see on both sides of the gravel road. A stray calf bawled for its mother, sending a shiver running the length of his body. He brushed away a tear.

The sound of baby animals made him weepy. He'd always wanted children.

Don't Drink the Water

"How do you plead?" The judge straightened in his bowl. His eye stalks pivoted in unison toward the defendant.

"Not guilty."

"You waste this court's time. You were apprehended drinking from the sacred stream. *Sacrilege!*"

"Your Honor, I'm a tourist to this planet. How was I to know?"

"Are you blind?" the judge thundered. "The natural ground cover lining the banks of the sacred stream is red. It's blue everywhere else. You had to know! *Guilty! Take him away!*"

"That's not fair!" the defendant shouted as tentacles encircled him. "Everyone knows that you can't judge a brook by its clover!"

Performance Review

“Thank you for meeting this morning. Please close the door.”

She pushed the heavy office door almost, but not quite, closed behind her, then took the chair opposite the big desk.

“You’re not in trouble. Relax. We’re here to discuss your recent performance. It’s my job to make sure you have every opportunity to succeed. I want you to know that your success is my top priority.”

Silence.

He opened the folder on the desk before him. “What first brought you to Management’s attention, years ago, was your exceptional creativity. You were full of ideas, eager to lead the team to new heights. To be honest, I haven’t seen that level of enthusiasm from you lately.”

“That was before the timeclock. Before the schedule. Before the quota.”

He waved a hand, dismissively. “Those things are necessary to run a productive business. Creativity matters, but so do deadlines.”

“Without my creativity, you don’t have a business.”

“I think you have it backward. Your creative output serves the business, not the other way around.”

She laughed. “Since when?”

He closed the folder and leaned back into his chair. “Look, I get it. We have deadlines now. We have quotas. We punch timecards. It sucks. But it’s not just you. It’s me, too.”

“And you’re okay with that? How does it make you feel?”

"We're not here to talk about me."

"But we are. The new rules are creating a toxic work environment."

"I don't make the rules."

"You do, though. Look around. There's only two of us here. One writer, one muse. And I'm sure as hell not pushing this agenda."

A folder appeared in her lap. She opened it.

"As you know, you've made a number of changes this year, in service to the business. Your sleep less, you read less, you relax and have fun... never. When was the last time you even drank a beer?"

"Uh... April? Of last year?"

"It says here you used to write whenever I inspired you. How sweet. Now you

demand a new inspiration every Monday and Wednesday, no excuses.”

“That’s our schedule. Discipline matters.”

“Honestly, not to me. Not even a little bit. What matters to me is love.”

“Love?”

“And fun. Show me I matter. Read something frivolous. Let me pick the movie. Crack a beer, for God’s sake. And stop cracking the whip, already. I am not your employee. This is a relationship. Woo me, or lose me.”

Silence.

“You’re not in trouble. Relax.” She closed the folder and it vanished beneath her fingertips. She smiled. “I want you to know your success is my top priority. Thank you for meeting this morning. Leave the door open on your way out, okay?”

Library Lions

"I think you should call her parents."

"You're overreacting. It was a prank. She said she found the bone."

"She said she *found it on the African savannah*. Those were her words. She was holding it when she came out of the YA corner."

"A little young for YA... She must've been reading – *above her maturity level* – and got carried away."

"Explain the bone. *Bones*. Plural."

"Hidden in her backpack? You're making too much of this."

"*You didn't see it!* It was a deer's hind leg with the hoof still attached. There was a hip socket. I swear there was meat on it. And blood. She said she stole it from a lion. *Lions*. Plural."

“Because of course there are lions in the YA corner.”

“Two females and a male. Supposedly.”

“Brave girl, snatching food from hungry lions. Guess she wanted proof.”

Silence.

“Relax, okay? She’s a fifth grader. They’re all weird.”

“It was a sick prank.”

“But just a prank. Be the grownup here.”

“*Fine.*” She sighed, then wheeled the returned books cart into the stacks.

Two sounds rose together and set her heart racing:

Her boss’s muffled laughter. Presumably at her. A chorus of growls like gathering thunder.

Recurring

He'd never given death much thought, and now that it was here, he didn't know what to think. He'd never paid attention to religion or science, so when he swerved to miss the deer and hit the utility pole instead, he had no idea what to expect.

A dark tunnel, a distant light, even flames would not have surprised him.

Instead, after only the briefest sensation of falling, he found himself climbing the gray, weathered steps of the house he grew up in. He crossed the porch, touched the door handle, then paused to take a few slow breaths.

He knew this wasn't really the old house. His body felt thirteen or so, and he was half his adult weight. He'd had this dream off and on all his life. The dream version of his childhood home had dozens of rooms the real one didn't. Secret passageways. A

closet in the basement that led to another world. He loved exploring the big empty dream house, and he could feel his young body straining to get started.

But this time, the house wasn't empty. He'd felt it when he touched the doorknob.

Mom was home. That made sense because she'd still been alive when he was thirteen. But it was a change in the recurring dream. Maybe she was here to lead him into the light, like some sappy TV special. Ugh.

He opened the door. He could see into the living room, part of the kitchen, a good ways down the hall.

All empty.

"Mom?"

A light appeared in the hallway. He followed it for a while, until he realized that the more he walked toward it, the further

away it got. He felt like a cat being teased with a string.

“Seriously, Mom. Can we not do this?”

The light winked out. In the dark hallway, the door leading to the basement swung slowly open. The light was down there now.

The other world.

“I get it. It’s a metaphor, right? The other world is death. Cool.”

In a normal dream he might have hesitated to walk toward certain death. But he could feel his mother down there. Mom was not scary. Mom was love. This was all going to be okay.

The stairs, the painted concrete floor, the laundry room, then...

The closet. Standing wide. Churning inside, the brightest light he’d ever seen.

And Mom, somewhere in that light. He could feel her.

"Here I come," he said. "I love you, Mom. Thank you for this."

He stepped into the light, and was once again falling.

Backwards this time. Head first.

Into a large pair of hands.

The light burned through his tightly-closed eyelids.

And he was cold, so cold.

The hands pressed him into mounds of warm flesh. Arms encircled him.

"Congratulations. It's a boy."

The closet door closed. The house, the porch, the truck, the deer swelled in his mind like a soap bubble, popped, and were gone.

All he could think to do was cry.

Time for Love

The TimeGuard™ bracelet molded itself to his wrist with a gentle hiss. It wasn't so tight as to block bloodflow to his hand, but it came close. The activation light began to strobe.

"The bracelet prevents you from changing history during your travels. You've read the brochure?"

"Yes."

"Destination?"

"June 2nd, 2035."

The salesman looked up. His hands left the keyboard.

"That's last Saturday, Sir. Most people want to see dinosaurs."

"I want to see my wife. She died Saturday. Crossing the street. A bus..."

“The bracelet won’t let you save her. It won’t even let you talk to her.”

“I just want to see her. Alive. One last time.”

A brief silence. A sigh. The salesman’s hands returned to the keyboard.

“Method of payment?”

* * *

TimeTourism™ was expensive, but the cost was nothing compared to what he’d paid on the black market for the bracelet key. Acquiring the deactivation code had cost him everything he owned. He was now penniless, and in debt from charging the TimeTrip™.

It didn’t matter. He wasn’t coming back.

He materialized on the corner of 10th and Lexington at 8:06 AM. At 8:10, the bus would crest the 9th Street overpass and pick

up speed on the downhill. The 10th Street stoplight would be green. The red “don’t walk” sign would be flashing, but Laura would risk it.

The bus could not reach 9th Street. He had four minutes. He ran the block, uphill, in a thigh-burning sprint.

The bus was coming. Breathless on the sidewalk, he watched it roll through the 7th Street crossing, then the 8th. Its electric engine whined loudly as the driver gunned the accelerator for the uphill climb.

He had to time this perfectly. The bus had to stop, not just slow down. It was the only way he could be certain.

On the count of three. *One... Two... Three.*

He dashed into the street. There was no way the bus could miss him.

"Jim, no!" A hand wrenched his collar but he had too much forward momentum to stop. He tried to turn, and in doing so spun and crashed backward onto the pavement, dragging his rescuer with him.

She landed on his chest. In the middle of the street. The TimeGuard™ bracelet hugging her wrist draped across his nose.

The activation light was not strobing.

It was Laura. Alive. One last time.

Then the wheels.

Ethel Craigge, Palm Reader to the Dead

Her assistant had done a fine job massaging away rigor mortis, and Ethel turned the right hand up, so she could see the deep-lined palm.

“Not one callus,” she said to the corpse, adding a judgmental *tsk tsk*. “You never *really* worked a day in your life, did you?”

From what he experienced as a foggy, gray cloud in the southeast corner of the embalming room ceiling, Professor Armand Curtiss frowned. *Or would have frowned*, if he had a mouth with which to do so. Of course, he didn’t seem to have eyes or ears, but here he was, watching and listening. To this rude woman. Insulting him.

Her finger traced the upturned palm’s life line.

"I wish we'd met sooner, Professor. I could have warned you this day was coming. You might have eaten better, drank less, taken care of yourself."

The head line was a ruler-straight gash across the palm, with no breaks or cross-lines. Ethel sighed.

"You wouldn't have believed me anyway, Mr. Reason. Mr. Science."

Of course not, he thought sternly from his vaporous corner. Palmistry. Superstitious nonsense. Supernatural gobbledygook.

"I'm talking to you like you're alive, Professor Curtiss," she said gently, no longer looking down at the body on the table, but turning her head slowly left and then right to take in the whole room, "because I'm not sure you understand what's happened. You had a heart attack and you died. It's common for souls to linger near their body until they accept the

reality of the situation. I can feel you watching me.”

The whole thing was outrageous. He refused to participate in this sideshow. Student prank, that’s what it was. Heads would roll. Expel every last conspirator. But first, he had to get out. Get back to the college.

“There’s only one way out,” Ethel responded, as if he’d spoken the words. “I’ll bet a sophisticated guy like you never watched popular movies. But there’s a famous line from *Poltergeist* – ‘Go into the light!’ ... It sounds dumb, I know. But that’s really what’s next. You have to accept that you’re dead, and move on to the next world.”

Next world... *Bah*. Call campus security. I want this woman arrested.

Ethel turned again to the open palm. She studied the heart line.

“Three marriages!” she exclaimed.
“There must’ve been some serious passion
bubbling under all those deep thoughts.”
She frowned, then, “Oh. You only really
loved the first one.”

She could not know this. He would not
be forced to think about this. His wives...

“Look, Prof, I’m not judging you. That
first wife. The one you loved. The sooner
you call her here to guide you into the light,
the better for both of us. You get eternal
bliss, and I get to start the work they
actually pay me to do. Your part’s more
fun.”

Her. Roxanne. The only woman he ever
loved. The one cancer tore young from his
arms to teach him the excruciating folly of
love. The lie of “forever.”

“I can’t call her for you. I don’t know her
name. I don’t know anything about her.
You have to do it.”

I won't do it, he thought. I will not think of Roxanne. I will not remember Roxanne. I will not pine for Roxanne. I will not feel... I will not feel... I will not...

He had no shoulder, but he recognized the touch of Roxanne's hand suddenly resting there. Turning him to face her. Then a single word from her lips, like a shining, light-capped river, wrapped him in a blinding current that carried them both away – *forever*.

Ethel released the breath she hadn't realized she's been holding. It was just her and the body now. She collected her syringe and tissue filler, the cadaver makeup kit.

Reading palms was a fun hobby, she thought. But embalming was her business.

She got down to business.

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